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VA, Navy hospitals share resources in advance of merger

Signs of the the planned merger of Navy and Veteran Affairs medical facilities can be seen at the North Chicago VA Medical Center and Great Lakes Naval Hospital.

The two hospitals are about a mile apart.

Navy orthopedic surgeons are operating on veterans at the Navy hospital and active-duty sailors with mental problems are being treated at a new psychiatric unit at the VA hospital.

"Before, our orthopedic patients had to go to Hines (VA Medical Center in Maywood)," said Patrick Sullivan, director of the North Chicago VA hospital. "This allows Navy orthopedic surgeons to experience the full range of surgery. They usually only see young men's injuries — broken bones. Our veterans are older and their orthopedic problems are different. They need hip replacements or knee replacements. That's a good example of why this has been a success."

A handful of sailors were in the Navy psychiatric unit at the VA hospital last week. The unit can treat up to 20 patients, said Dr. Ioana Sandu, a psychiatrist and graduate of the Chicago Medical School in North Chicago who directs the operation.

The Navy Hospital psychiatric unit closed last fall when the new VA unit opened, Sullivan said.

Active duty Navy personnel are now going to the VA for physical therapy, too. "We have a state-of-the-art physical therapy department," Sullivan said.

The next step in the merger is a \$12 million expansion of the VA's operation and emergency rooms, Sullivan said. "That will be done in the next 18 to 24 months," he said. "Then, the rest of

inpatient services from the Navy hospital will move here ... Navy surgeons will come over here and operate on VA patients."

A new, \$170 million VA-Navy hospital on the VA grounds in North Chicago is being planned. U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, said last year that the hospital would be built in about five years.

The Navy plans to replace its hospital with an ambulatory care (outpatient) facility, Sullivan said.

"It's a win-win situation for veterans, active duty personnel, their dependents and taxpayers," he said. "We'll be able to offer more services for both populations at less cost."

The merger is "breaking new ground," Sullivan said. "This will be the first integrated VA-Navy medical facility in the country. This could be the future of federal medicine."

Sullivan was named director of the 500-bed North Chicago VA last June. He had been acting director of the hospital since November 2002, when Al Pate, the former director, retired and was associate director since 1996.

Sullivan, a Grayslake resident originally from Tucson, Ariz., is a career VA health administrator. He joined the agency in 1980 after graduation from Arizona State University in Tempe and has worked in nine VA facilities in Arizona, Oregon, Washington, D.C., Missouri and Illinois.

"The community support the VA gets here in North Chicago is as good or better than any VA I've worked in," he said.

Sullivan never served in the military, as many VA managers have, but his late father was a World War II veteran and a career Army man. His wife, Marilyn, is a VA nurse. "I was an Army brat, so it wasn't a big stretch for me to move into the VA system," he said.

"We have a great mission at the VA," Sullivan said. "Health care is extremely important and, added on to that, we have the opportunity to serve the men and women have served our country. We proud to serve these men and women."

Sullivan is proud of the VA medical care system. "With our advanced access program, you get an appointment the day you call, there's no months-long wait to see a doctor," he said.

"We have what other health care systems only dream of," Sullivan said. "No thumbing through pieces of paper to find a lab result. Everything's on computer, all the patient records, medications, history, and we have access to everyone at every VA facility in the country. In 20 years, maybe the rest of the country will catch up."

The North Chicago VA hospital already is treating discharged veterans of the Iraq War. The hospital has seen 25 combat veterans from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf, said Doug Shouse, a VA spokesman.